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ABSTRACT

In his book "The Closing of the American Mind," Allan Bloom criticizes popular music for the "emptiness of its values." It has only one appeal, says Bloom, "a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire--not love, not eros, but sexual desire, undeveloped and untutored." However, to say "rock music is this or that" is a proposition that quickly crumbles under the evidence of the songs themselves. There are more artists, "more songs in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Allan." In fact, popular music can be used in the classroom to fulfill some of the objectives of a liberal education that Bloom himself identifies. First, popular music can be a valuable resource for introducing students to poetry: lyricists use many of the same conventions that poets have used for centuries. Second, popular music is a useful kind of mnemonic device to teach about theme or character. Some students find it easier to understand the concept of a dynamic world versus the static world of Keat's poetry after they have heard Van Halen's "Best of Both Worlds." Similarly, "Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm" by Crash Test Dummies, a song about how people are socialized to be a homogenous bunch, might help students understand something about "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Third, students can write about song lyrics as a form of art. Popular music in literary study is not a replacement for traditional texts but a complement to it. (TB)

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In Defense of Popular Music

Once many years ago, I was in a bar drinking beer with some of my graduate school friends. When I returned to the table after playing a Van Halen song on the jukebox, one of my friends looked at me soberly and said: "Gee, Steve, I didn't know you were a barbarian." This statement came from a man who one day, in another bar, had come precariously close to punching out a colleague over an argument about literary theory.

My point here is not that my friend's philosophy seemed hypocritical or contradictory--whose doesn't, sometimes?--but that his comment calls attention to the erroneous assumption that the words "popular" and "culture" are mutually exclusive when referring to aspects of human experience. Everyone is familiar with this belief: the assumption on which it is based is not unlike the criticisms made by some over the shift from Latin to English in the Catholic mass that occurred during the 1960's; not unlike the criticism, by some, of the inclusion of guitar music instead of only traditional hymns that occurred several years later. The two of these things don't go together; one of these things just doesn't belong.

All of this, of course, is especially appropriate in discussing the marriage of popular music and literary studies.

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Here the traditionalist positions alluded to above are well represented by the voice of Allan Bloom. In his book The Closing of the American Mind, Bloom laments the failure of our colleges and universities to educate young people. My intention here is not to use Bloom as my straw man: he is much too thoughtful and intelligent for that. But I do want to explore the charges he makes about education, specifically where popular music is concerned, and discuss how his evaluations might help guide us in using music in the classroom.

Bloom does not discuss music and literature together in the same way I am considering it here today, but the opening sentences of his essay "Music" do call attention to the problem as he sees it. He says: "Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. . . . It is their passion; nothing else excites them as it does . . ." (68). There is nothing wrong with the love of music; indeed, Bloom himself recounts the joys of introducing students to Mozart. However, the problem is not simply that students have traded their books for music; it is the kind of music they listen to, the quality of the experience they have when they listen to it, and its effects on their relationship to the world around them. In short, we might describe Bloom's attitude by borrowing a phrase from T. S. Eliot. Rock music suffers from a kind of

"dissociation of sensibility"; it does not balance intellect and emotion, thought and passion.

To develop his argument, and to show the power that music has for young people today, Bloom compares and contrasts today's students' enthusiasm for rock music with the passionate feelings Germans attached to Wagner's operas in the previous century. Germans, says Bloom, "had the religious sense that Wagner was creating the meaning of life and that they were not merely listening to his works but experiencing that meaning" (68). Here music is not simply something pleasant to listen to but a social ritual, a kind of sacred event in which the individual participates and finds meaning and identity--not unlike going to church. "To Plato and Nietzsche," says Bloom, "the history of music is a series of attempts to give form and beauty to the dark, chaotic, premonitory forces in the soul--to make them serve a higher purpose, an ideal . . ." This can be achieved as long as the lyrics--"speech and, hence, reason"--"determine the music--harmony and rhythm" (72). The result is an art form wherein what have been considered dualities of human life in Western thought--the body and the mind or soul or spirit--find a harmonious relationship.

Rock music does not do this, according to Bloom. While certainly encouraging passions as powerful as those felt by

Wagner's audience, it does not balance them with thought. Bloom states:

> rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire--not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children's emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing. (73)

The lyrics of rock music describe sexual acts, says Bloom, portraying them as the "only natural and routine culmination for children who do not yet have the slightest imagination of love, marriage, or family" (74). In addition, rock music is a symptom of an "emptiness of values" that has been occurring in Western culture "for some time" (77), during which the "serious life of leisure" has given way to mere entertainment, something mass produced and sold. "The emptiness of values," says Bloom, "results in the acceptance of the natural facts as the ends" (77). Or, to quote Eliot again, "We had the experience but missed the meaning."

Those of us who listen to rock music know, at least those of us who are older than the students Bloom talks about know, that

some of what he says is true for some songs. Finding serious intellectual content in a song like Whitesnake's "Slide it In" is difficult. And we also know that many young people (and older people) use music as a mood-altering medium, a kind of auditory drug, not as a means of enlightenment, spiritual or otherwise.

However, to say "rock music is this or that" is a proposition that quickly crumbles under the evidence of the songs themselves. There are more artists, more songs in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Allan. Thus it is probably not possible to demonstrate that rock music affects one's education or development this way or that way.

Bloom's definition of what education should be is sensible. He argues that it is not "sermonizing to children against their instincts and pleasures, but providing a natural continuity between what they feel and what they can and should be" (80). It involves "the taming or domestication of the soul's raw passions--forming and informing them as art" (71). And it involves questioning one's own assumptions about the world. Bloom says: "If a student can . . . draw back, get a critical distance on what he clings to and come to doubt the ultimate value of what he loves, he has taken the first and most difficult step toward the philosophic conversion" (71).

How can we connect popular music to what we do in the classroom, and then how can we connect them to this notion of education? First of all, popular music can be a valuable resource in introducing students to poetry: lyricists use many of the same conventions poets have used for centuries. A colleague of mine, for example, once used a single passage from Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl" to illustrate metonymy, synecdoche, end rhyme, internal rhyme, repetition with variation, parallelism, consonance, and alliteration.

Popular music is also useful as a kind of mnemonic device to teach about theme or character. Some of my students found it easier to understand the concept of the dynamic world versus the static world in Keats' poetry after I played them Van Halen's "Best of Both Worlds," a popular rock song from the 1980's. Keats' language and phrasing are quite complex, but humming a tune and recalling a title are simple activities which can give students a window on the work they are studying.

Music also enriches our appreciation of a particular character or situation, gives it texture. "Middle Man" by Living Colour helped my students understand Ellison's narrator in Invisible Man. The speaker in the song explains his desire to be an ordinary individual person, a "middle man" (rather than a leader or a member of a group), and expresses his reluctance to

become an object of the schemes or plans of others. The paradoxical nature of the speaker's bond with humanity is shown through his statement: "My ideas are . . . / Not yours, not theirs, but I care") This situation mirrors that of Ellison's narrator, who expresses a similar dilemma. And the title of the song itself recalls the "border area" setting in which Ellison's narrator resides.

More recently, "Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm" by Crash Test Dummies, a song about how we are socialized to be a homogenous bunch, might help students understand something about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The song describes three young people, all of whom are somehow "different" as a result of some physical or psychological trait. The first two verses describe a boy whose hair turns white as the result of an accident and a girl who is afraid to undress in gym class because her body is covered with birthmarks. Yet "both girl and boy were glad" because "one kid had it worse than that." This attitude recalls that of the "shore" characters in Twain's novel who, when swindled by the King and Duke, are happy to see other people in the "same boat."

Yet more significantly, the song, like Twain's novel, makes a point about social conventions. In the song, the kid who has it worst lives with fundamentalist Christian parents who make him come "directly home" after school and who "shake and lurch all

over the church floor." The song states, "He [the kid] couldn't quite explain it / They'd always just gone there." Whatever our feelings about fundamentalist Christianity may be, one point of the song seems to be that living without questioning assumptions or conventions is a greater affliction than either an acquired or congenital physical deformity.

These kinds of examples also show students that what we are asking them to study in literature courses, what we would call "the best that has been thought and written," is not essentially alien to their own experience; it is simply presented in a different form.

Another way to use music is to have students write about song lyrics, incorporating some of the criteria Bloom describes above. My students, for example, have interpreted and evaluated popular music lyrics as a form of art--not as poetry, exactly, nor as fiction, but in the sense Susanne K. Langer defines art: "the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling." Students pick the texts; they choose a popular song to write about. The purpose of the assignment is for the students to interpret and evaluate the lyrics carefully and argue whether or not the song is "good." Students analyze the speaker and situation, the figurative language used, and the structure of the song. They can also consider whether the rhythm or melody

reinforces a mood or feeling implied by the lyrics. If they are writing about music videos, they can consider how the visual images are related to the theme(s) of the song.

Most students want to write about songs they like, so they naturally believe these songs are good, but of course one needs to establish some criteria for what makes a song good. One way is to ask students to respond to Bloom. Ask them to point to the lyrics from the song they have chosen to help them agree or disagree with the following statement Bloom makes:

> Rock music encourages passions and provides models that have no relation to any life the young people who go to universities can possibly lead, or to the kinds of admiration encouraged by liberal studies. (80)

Here I will admit I am using Bloom as a kind of straw man, yet I remind students that however they feel about this statement, in order to defend a song they need to consider to what extent the "passions" or "models" referred to in it are relevant to their experience or in what way the song helps them understand something about the world they live in. If they can do this, they have taken a step forward in critical thinking.

A few years ago, I used Ozzy Osbourne's "Suicide Solution" in a class discussion. I chose this song partly because it had generated a lot of controversy. Some parents wanted to censor

it, because it contains lines like "Suicide is the only way out." The parents were rightfully concerned about high rates of drug abuse and suicide among young people, and some felt this song encouraged these acts.

However, once we began to carefully examine the lyrics, we discovered the song was better described as anti-suicide and anti-drug. In the song, which is told from the second-person point of view, the speaker (who could be either a friend or another aspect of a confused and troubled person's self) describes a tormented life of alcoholism and depression. There is no encouragement to engage in destructive behavior; instead, the speaker asks: "Don't you know what it's really about"?

Attacks on this song are not unlike those charges of racism made against The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Both are problems of context: in both cases, some people mistakenly equate the dramatic situation created through a character with the intention of the author. An important part of critical thinking is being able to disentangle the two of these things, or, if one cannot, at least being able to consider why one has difficulty doing so. Clearly this is not always easy, but why should it be? In this spirit, I will leave it up to all of you to decide whether or not you want to allow the music of 2 Live Crew in your classrooms.

Popular music in literary study is not a replacement for traditional texts, but rather a compliment to them. We can perform the same close textual analysis on many song lyrics that literature classes have traditionally done for our canonical texts. We can discuss the social or political implications of songs in the same way we now do with standard literary texts. We can illuminate and make relevant what may appear to our students as the cryptic experiences of obscure humans in ancient times. And we can have fun doing so.

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